Just What Children's Book Week Means

By FREDERIC G. MELCHER,

Chairman of Children's Book Week Committee.

THOSE who love books and who are constantly among them want to make it easier for all to have access to just the books they want when they want them. That is just the impulse back of Children's Book Week, which is having its fourth annual observance. A million children come to reading age every year are taught to read and are pointed the way to the world of print. How broad a country each will explore, how much of high adventure or romance, of science or invention, of travel or of human understanding will be opened up to each will vary all too much. The boy and girl growing up with plenty of books in the home is the fortunate adventurer. Sometimes the books are not there because parents have forgotten how they, as children, used to love reading; sometimes because they do not remember what books there are for the children's bookshelf.

Of course, there is no perfect and final list of books for this shelf. But, better than that, there exist hundreds of good books, informing books, beautiful books, thrilling books, noble books waiting the right readers. It has been the object of Children's Book Week to get books and reading discussed by those who can prove most helpful and inspiring. It is when there is no discussion of books that dull and wooden books get their chance. Every town has in its midst those who can give good guidance on children's reading. Their knowledge and insight need to be made full use of that parents and children may both be the gainers.

Four years ago Franklin K. Mathiews, who, as Chief Scout librarian, had been studying the problem of getting books to boys, proposed at a convention of booksellers that there be a really national effort to make this a country of readers, and to begin with the boys and girls, where everything has to begin. There was no difficulty in rallying the booksellers to the idea. They knew how few were the homes with good libraries. The great national organization of public libraries was appealed to with their hundreds of experts in children's reading and they heartily responded. Librarians had long taken the attitude that their responsibility for developing reading interests could not end with the library doors.

The publishers promised funds for posters and promotion, and a headquarters was established. Jessie Willcox Smith was commissioned to make a poster. Pamphlets, programs, advertising were prepared. The schools were interested, as the idea of a broadened personal reading to develop the individual was in direct line with their ideas. The widespread organization of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts cooperated, and women's clubs, churches and Sunday schools found such a movement to their liking. Periodicals and newspapers gave spontaneous comment, as the subject of children's reading was one decidedly in line with their fundamental interests.

Of course it is year round reading habits that are wanted, not seven day spurts, but the emphasis of a Week brings the discussion of reading to the front, points out where progress lies and brings together by common enthusiasm those who know books and love children and who believe in "more books in the home." The children are book hungry; let them have plenty and of the best.

What Are the Great Children's Stories and Why

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impressions of early childhood. If persistent survival means anything, Aesop's Fables ought to have a leading place in every child's library, for the stories and anecdotes that we now know under that name have through slow migration from their birthplace in India endured upward of 2,000 years and undergone many metamorphoses in form and language as they were gradually being cut and polished into the finished gems that we now know. France, luckier than ourselves, had her own great fabulist who set these gems in a purely French setting of inimitable wit and charm. La Fontaine has been the despair of translators, and curiously enough, he sounds in English garb more foreign than the genuine Aesop that has come to us through Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek and Latin. Aesop in simple English prose is part of every child's rightful heritage. But it is one of the books that suffer frequently from critical age limits. Give these fables to a child a little too soon or a little too late and he will miss the golden magic of them.

Aesop naturally reminds us of the two modern classes of animal story: the traditional sort, in which animals still talk, best represented by Kipling's "Jungle Books"; and the strictly realistic type, among which Ernest Thompson Seton's "Wild Animals I Have Known" is still without a peer. It may be true (to quote Anatole France once more) that we cannot see the world through the narrow brain of an Orang-Utan, or the facetted eyes of a fly; but Mr. Seton accomplishes an almost similar prodigy by making us see the life of the wild through the sensitive nose of a prairie wolf. He is the first writer to make us realize that to all the creatures which roam the forest the whole earth's surface is an intricate and fascinating record of crossing trails, from which each can read, in proportion to his keeness of scent, the recent presence of friend or foe, which way they went, where they lingered, the whole intimate history of their daily life. Of woodcraft as the Indian or trapper knows it, an abundance may be found in many an earlier book. But to open up the intricacies of animal psychology, to reveal the processes of their reasonings and their instincts is a far subtler achievement, and it is this which gives Mr. Seton's stories their their unique value.

The "Jungle Books," on the other hand, are the age-old type of anthropomorphized beast story, drawn straight from the original fount of fable. They were wrought from the crude substance of Hindoo folklore, transmuted by a magic alchemy into wonder books, fraught with the essence of the mysterious East. The boy or girl who has not yet made the acquaintance of Mowgli, nor learned the Law of the Jungle nor listened to the age-old wisdom of Ka, the serpent, has been defrauded of something that was his or her rightful due.

Even more important than the "Jungle Books" are the "Just So Stories," which constitute a unique success in the elusive art of telling a story "just so." Little children are the most critical audience in the world; and woe betide the luckless narrator who misplaces a word or distorts the rhythm of a well loved tale. The "Just So Stories" bear the stamp of having been slowly fashioned through many patient repetitions. Mr. Kipling owes something both to Æsop and to Mother Goose, for he has written fables of talking animals according to the word patterns of Peter Piper. It matters not whether such a phrase as "great, gray, green, greasy Limpopo River" carries a clear picture to the youthful mind; children rejoice at meeting words that they only half understand, and the rich recurrence of sonorous syllables adds a colorful mystery to otherwise understandable stories of animals' children who are snubbed and scolded and spanked upon occasion, in a painfully human and familiar fashion.

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In these days, when education is tending more and more toward the practical and scientific, the fairy tale is more than ever an essential antidote. Fairyland is a precious prerogative of childhood, and a world deprived of fanciful elves and gnomes and pixies would be as dull as a world without dolls or tops or marbles. "Grimm's Fairy Tales" and "Hans Andersen" rank among the great books because between them they contain practically all those traditional fairy tales without which no child's education is complete. A unique fairy tale in verse, curiously neglected in recent years, is "The Culprit Fay," by an American poet, Joseph Rodman Drake, whose grave is in the little park named after him in The Bronx. This poem was written on a wager, to prove that a fairy story could be written entirely within the fairy realm, without the intrusion of a single mortal. It was not purposely written for children; but its wealth of rainbow-tinted, gossamer fancies has by actual test seldom failed to hold the imaginative boy or girl spellbound.

English literature is fortunate in possessing several classics that blend the qualities of fairy tale and allegory—wonderland adventures with a deeper meaning behind them. It may sound odd to class together books of such widely different aims as "The Pilgrim's Progress" and "Alice in Wonderland", yet the technic of the two is much the same. The Slough of Despond, Castle Dangerous, Giant Despair are as purely imaginative creations as the Rabbit Hole, the Mad Hatter and the Cheshire Cat. In Bunyan's masterpiece, however, the preachment behind the allegory is so everlastingly trying to occupy the whole stage that it is not strange that "Pilgrim's Progress" has ceased to be popular with a generation that rebels against sugarcoated sermons. Charles Kingsley's "Water Babies," while at its best a delightful flight of imagination, is also to a considerable extent handicapped with interludes of preachment and satiric digressions that modern youth is sure to skip altogether. But "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" are volumes without a flaw, masterpieces of imperishable nonsense, constructed with unfaltering logic around a pack of cards and a game of chess. Children read them solely for their whimsicality. Grownups go back to them with new zest, delighting page by page in the discovery of hidden meanings they had never before even suspected.

Fifty Poems for Children

Selected by BURTON E. STEVENSON,

Editor of "The Home Book of Verse."

Rhymes of Childhood.

Little Orphant Annie. James Whitcomb Riley.
The Man in the Moon. James Whitcomb Riley.
Our Hired Girl. James Whitcomb Riley.
Seein' Things. Eugene Field.
Wynken, Blynken and Nod. Eugene Field.
A Visit from St. Nicholas. Clement Clarke Moore.
Jest 'fore Christmas. Eugene Field.

Just Nonsense.

The Jumblies. Edward Lear.
The Pobble Who Has No Toes. Edward Lear.
The Walrus and the Carpenter. Lewis Carroll.
The Duel. Eugene Field.

This Wonderful World.

The Wonderful World. William Brighty Rands.
The World's Music. Gabriel Setoun.
June (from the Vision of Sir Launfal). James Russell Lowell.
To the Dandelion. James Russell Lowell.
I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud. William Wordsworth.
To a Mountain Daisy. Robert Burns.
Ode to a Skylark. Percy Bysshe Shelley.
To a Mouse. Robert Burns.

Stories in Rhyme.

Paul Revere's Ride. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
The Skeleton in Armor. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
Herve Riel. Robert Browning.
How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix. Robert Browning.
The Inchcape Rock. Robert Southey.
The Pied Piper of Hamelin. Robert Browning.
God's Judgment on a Wicked Bishop. Robert Southey.
The Diverting History of John Gilpin. William Cowper.

Courage and Loyalty.

Ivry. Thomas Babington Macaulay.
Drake's Drum. Henry Newbolt.
Sir Humphrey Gilbert. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
Charge of the Light Brigade. Alfred Tennyson.
Barbara Frietchie. John Greenleaf Whittier.
Kearny at Seven Pines. Edmund Clarence Stedman.
Sheridan's Ride. Thomas Buchanan Read.
Horatius at the Bridge. Thomas Babington Macaulay.

Life Lessons.

A Psalm of Life. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
The Arrow and the Song. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
Abou Ben Adhem. Leigh Hunt.
The House by the Side of the Road. Sam Walter Foss.
The Noble Nature. Ben Jonson.
Character of the Happy Warrior. William Wordsworth.
He Fell Among Thieves. Henry Newbolt.
Invictus. William Ernest Henley.
If. Rudyard Kipling.
The Chambered Nautilus. Oliver Wendell Holmes.
To a Water Fowl. William Cullen Bryant.
The Rhodora. Ralph Waldo Emerson.
On His Blindness. John Milton.
Crossing the Bar. Alfred Tennyson.
Prospice. Robert Browning.